THE ELEVATION OF NORTON PRIORY, CHESHIRE, TO THE STATUS OF MITRED ABBEY

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THE elevation of the Augustinian priory of Norton to the status of an abbey has been noticed by several writers, but none have hitherto been able to assign a date to the event, nor has there been any discussion of the circumstances surrounding this distinction. The excavation of the site, which has been directed by the writer since 1971 has provided an incentive to re-examine Norton's history. The elevation can be seen in the context not only of information derived from historical sources, but also the physical remains of Norton revealed by excavation.

The date of the elevation, 1391, has eluded previous researchers, William Beamont, who published a somewhat idiosyncratic, though nonetheless useful, history of Norton in 1873, suggested 1423. Professor Tait gave the date of the elevation as 'between 1379 and 1399', while 'early in the reign of Henry VI, if not sooner' was another suggestion. In fact, the evidence was published in volume four of the Calendar of Papal Registers in 1902. Three successive privileges were granted by Pope Boniface IX during 1391. The first grant was the elevation of Norton to an abbey, with prior Richard as abbot, at the petition of John, duke of Lancaster, the patron, and the prior and convent of Norton.

The next communication from Rome was a faculty to abbot Richard to receive benediction from any catholic bishop of his choice in communion with the apostolic see. The third letter, addressed to abbot Richard, was an indulg to him and his successors to use the mitre, ring, pastoral staff and other pontifical insignia, and to give solemn benediction in the monastery after mass, vespers and matins, provided no bishop be present.

The significance of the elevation must be seen in the context of the Augustinian order. The rules of the order were based, rather loosely, on advice given by St Augustine of Hippo to two monasteries in North Africa in the early fifth century. The order was promoted by Pope Gregory VII as part of his programme of
reforms; he and other reformers encouraged the adoption of rules by colleges of secular canons. Subsequently they also became the basis for the foundation of new religious houses. The brethren of the order were known as regular canons, that is men ordained as priests living communally according to a Rule. The Rule was introduced into England at the beginning of the twelfth century. St Botolph's, Colchester, was probably the first Augustinian priory in England, founded in about 1104. The order spread rapidly. When William fitz Nigel, the second baron of Halton, founded an Augustinian priory at Runcorn in 1115 (transferred to Norton by his son William in 1134) there were about ten other Augustinian houses in England. The Rule was adopted by several other orders, such as the Premonstratensians and the Gilbertines, blended with a Cistercian form of filial organisation. The English members of two congregations, Arrouasians and Victorines, severed their continental connections and became conventional Augustinian houses. Eventually about 200 religious houses in England and Wales were members of the Augustinian order. It also became popular in Scotland, and proved particularly well suited to the form of the church in Ireland where it was introduced by Bishop Malachi.

Unlike the reformed orders of monks, the Augustinians had originally no form of supervision through a general chapter or visitation system. Each house was autonomous, although in each diocese the bishop had a responsibility for some supervision because as regular canons were clergy in theory, they came within the ambit of episcopal interest. It was probably this theoretical subservience that lead to most Augustinian houses being founded as priories rather than abbeys, the bishop perhaps being seen as occupying the place of abbot though in a non-executive capacity.

The weakness of these rather informal arrangements for ensuring good order was evident when compared to the efficient organisation of the reformed orders of monks. In consequence, general Chapters of the order and a system for periodic visitation, were instituted following the Lateran Council of 1215.

Although, as has been stated, most Augustinian religious houses were priories, a few were founded as abbeys. The largest group of abbeys were those that belonged to the Arrouasion community (Bourne, Lincs.; Dorchester, Oxon; Hartland, Devon; Haughmond, Salop; Lesnes, Kent; Lilleshall, Salop; Missenden, Bucks; Notley, Bucks; Owston, Leics.; and Warter, Yorks.), and the Victorine congregation (Bristol; Keynsham, Som.; and Wigmore, Hereford) which followed the Cistercian practice in this matter.

The reasons for the status of the main group of Augustinian abbeys are unknown, but it is possible to suggest explanations. In
the case of two abbeys, Bardsey Island (Caerns.) and Cirencester (Glos.), their pre-conquest existence may be significant. Bardsey was founded before 516, and Cirencester before 839. As existing establishments they may have enjoyed privileges and a degree of autonomy that were difficult to reconcile with episcopal involvement when they were refounded as Augustinian houses, however theoretical that involvement might have been in practice. Cirencester’s wealth may also have justified its abbey status. Royal interest may have been another factor. Wellow Abbey, Lincs., was founded by Henry I; he also founded the short-lived abbey at Dover in 1131, which after three years was forced to become Benedictine.

Another group of abbeys was founded in important Midland towns. Leicester Abbey became one of the largest houses of the order. St James, Northampton, was also an abbey. Darley Abbey had as its original complement the canons of St Helens, Derby. In the two remaining cases, Rocester, Staffs., and Combwell, it is difficult to find any reason for the enhanced status (although the latter house may in fact have originated as a Premonstratensian abbey). In the event, Combwell sought permission, in 1219, to become a priory on the grounds of financial incapacity to maintain the requirements of its rank. Warter became a priory in 1206.

Thus, if Dover and Combwell, and the alien congregations, are excluded, seven Augustinian abbeys enjoyed that status from their foundation to the Dissolution. Of these, Wellow, Rocester and Bardsey seem always to have remained small, and had incomes of £95, £100 and £46 at the Dissolution. A number of Augustinian priories were, like Norton, raised to abbey status, but this remained a rare distinction. In the case of the elevated abbeys, size and wealth do seem to have been factors. Again, a guide to this is provided by the Valor Ecclesiasticus, for there is no evidence that possession of abbey status increased revenues or improved the generosity of benefactors. Of the nine priories that became abbeys, all but two were amongst the larger abbeys that survived until 1539 (or, in the case of Waltham Holy Cross, 1540). The two exceptions were North Creake in Norfolk, where the canons all died in an epidemic in 1506, and Norton. Norton Abbey was listed as having a net annual value of £180 in the Valor, but as has been pointed out this is almost certainly a deliberate understatement by the assessors to enable the closure of Norton in 1536 as one of the smaller houses with an income of less than the decisive £200 of the Act of Suppression. There is evidence that similar falsification occurred at Northampton, where after payment of a fine the abbey survived until 1538, and at Hexham.
When the value of the spiritualities and temporalities of Norton were re-assessed by the commissioners in 1536, they were put at £343.12

The elevated abbeys can be divided into two groups, those elevated in the twelfth century, i.e. relatively shortly after foundation, and those elevated in succeeding centuries. In the case of the first group there is little available information about the circumstances surrounding the elevation. All however were substantial foundations that probably justified their enhanced status on grounds of size. Thornton, Lincs., was founded in 1139 and elevated in 1148; Osney, Oxon, founded in 1129 was elevated in 1154; St Osyth, Essex, was a pre-Conquest house refounded in 1121 and was elevated some time before 1161, and Waltham Holy Cross, Essex, was a college of secular canons which was refounded in 1177 and elevated in 1184. The close royal involvement in Waltham must have been an important factor, as it was in the case of North Creake, Norfolk, which was founded in 1206 and elevated in 1231 when the patronage was in the hands of Henry III.13 There were no further elevations until that of Norton in 1391, although in 1191 Waltham succeeded in gaining papal permission to use the mitre and other pontifical insignia, and also procured exemption from episcopal jurisdiction.14 The only other Augustinian house to gain exemption was St Botolph's Colchester, the first foundation of the order in England.15

From the examples above two factors which supported a priory's claim for elevation (size and royal interest) have been recognised. In the case of Norton, four factors may have been involved—the size and wealth of the community, the size of the buildings, the social role of the prior, and the status of the patron. The first two factors are closely linked. The original endowments by the founders of the house first at Runcorn and then at Norton were substantial; they are listed in the foundation charters.16 Successive barons of Halton added to the endowments, as did the holders of knights' fees in the barony. The scale of benefaction is reflected in the growth of the priory buildings, as excavation has revealed. The first buildings comprised a standard modest Augustinian church—cruciform, and with no aisles (very similar to the canons' churches at Portchester, Hants., and Leonard Stanley, Glos., for example). A square cloister with the usual conventual buildings lay to the south of the church. Towards the end of the twelfth century however a massive rebuilding operation commenced. The west and south ranges were taken down and rebuilt on a larger scale; the cloister was also enlarged. The east range was lengthened, and extensions to the nave and chancel were built. A new chapter house was constructed, twice the size of the pre-
vious one. All this suggests that the original buildings were designed for the standard complement, twelve canons and a prior. The rebuilding operation indicates that the intention was to double this number. Certainly, there were more than the standard number even in the late fourteenth century; fifteen brethren are listed in the poll tax assessment.\textsuperscript{17}

The buildings continued to grow in size in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Chapels to the north and south of the chancel were rebuilt on a large scale, apparently to accommodate the many burials of benefactors. Elaborately decorated sandstone coffins of some of the benefactors have been excavated. A mosaic tile floor was provided for both the church and chapter house in the early fourteenth century. At about the same time, a large stone-vaulted chapel was added to the east end of the already extended chancel. The chapel may have been built to house the ‘holy cross of Norton’ which is recorded as occasioning several miracles in 1287.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, in the fourteenth century, Norton had become one of the larger Augustinian priories in terms of buildings, community, and benefactions. The role of the prior had shown a parallel rise in importance. As Norton was the first Augustinian priory in the North West, it is not surprising to find the prior of Norton amongst the signatories of the foundation charter of Burscough, Lancs., in about 1189\textsuperscript{19} and subsequent confirmations in 1232.\textsuperscript{20} It seems likely that some of the original canons of Burscough were drawn from Norton.

In the fourteenth century, the prior of Norton appears in other documents. When the Lateran Council established the practice of holding regular chapters in a number of central locations, the prior of Norton regularly attended them.\textsuperscript{21} In 1337, in the chapter held at St Frideswide’s, Oxford, the prior of Norton was appointed a diffinitor—one of the officers charged with examining visitations, and drawing up rules for their conduct. At Northampton in 1350, and at Newstead in 1371, the prior was appointed visitor for the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield. In 1380, and again in 1383, at Northampton and Newstead respectively, the prior was a diffinitor.

The prior might be called upon to carry out other duties on behalf of the church. For example, in 1346 Pope Clement VI appointed Robert, prior of Norton, as an examiner in the matter of conferring the office of notary on a clerk.\textsuperscript{22} Probably the most onerous duty to have been shouldered by a prior of Norton occurred in 1379 when Prior Richard was appointed assessor and collector of the clerical poll tax in the archdeaconry of Chester. Richard’s assessment survives in an unusually complete form, listing the liability of regular, beneficed, and unbefited clergy to contribute to the ‘subsidy granted to the king by the prelates
and clergy of Canterbury province'. The assessment shows where Norton ranked in size at this date compared to other religious houses in the archdeaconry (which comprised Cheshire and that part of Lancashire south of the Ribble). Chester Abbey had 27 monks, Whalley had 24 monks, Vale Royal had 18 monks, and Norton Priory had 15 canons. Consequently, Norton’s assessment was fourth highest amongst the eleven religious houses in the list.

The fourth factor that can be seen to be an asset to Norton in seeking abbey status was the backing of a person of rank. In John of Lancaster the priory had a most impressive patron. His connection with Norton derived from the original foundation by the Barons of Halton. By a succession of marriages, the hereditary title and office of Baron of Halton and Constable of Cheshire passed to the Lacy’s of Pontefract, and subsequently the Earls of Lincoln. The Earldom in turn became part of the Duchy of Lancaster, so when John of Gaunt acted as petitioner with the priory in their application for elevation, it was as the fourteenth baron of the important honour of Halton. It was thus particularly appropriate that John’s son, the new King Henry IV in whom the barony now resided, set the final seal on the elevation. He granted a licence, dated 22nd December in the second year of his reign for the prior and convent of Norton to elect an abbot—presumably Richard’s successor. Henceforth Norton remained an abbey until the Dissolution.

The conditions under which the petition was submitted to Rome were favourable not only from the point of view of the qualifications of Norton for abbey status, but also the state of the papacy. Although writers on the subject of Pope Boniface IX differ on his motives and personality, all agree that the sale of papal privileges reached record levels during his reign. Some ascribe this to simple avarice, others explain his financial actions as resulting from the depletion of revenues caused by the Great Scism, necessitating desperate measures; nonetheless, ‘everything had its price’. In most cases the sale of privileges worked particularly to the disadvantage of Augustinian houses by releasing many canons from their vows.

However, it would be a mistake to see Norton’s elevation simply in terms of advantage being taken of a needy pope. Norton’s claims to abbey status were substantial, and it is doubtful whether John of Lancaster would have lent his support to a spurious case. It is also notable that Norton is the only English priory to have been elevated by Boniface; had the process been one of merely collecting the asking price one would have expected to see more successful applicants among the English houses. The most
persuasive evidence that the new status of abbey was not a hollow title, bought from an impecunious pope, is provided by an event in 1395. At the chapter of the Augustinian houses of the province of Canterbury, held in Northampton, Richard, Abbot of Norton was elected President of Chapter.\textsuperscript{27} It seems most unlikely that Richard would have been thus honoured by his peers unless there was real substance to the distinction Norton had recently acquired.

It must have been during this period that Norton was granted new arms. As the only mitred abbey in Cheshire apart from St Werburgh's Chester, there was clearly considerable prestige to be gained from demonstrating the fact. The original arms of the priory were those of the Barons of Halton, it being a frequent practice for a religious house to adopt the arms of its founder. They were \textit{gules, a pale fusilly or}.\textsuperscript{28}

Following the elevation, new arms were adopted which laid great stress on the possession of the mitre \textit{gules, a pale fusilly or, a bordure azure thereon eight mitres of the second}.\textsuperscript{29}

To see the whole matter of elevation in perspective, it is necessary to examine other examples of special honours being granted by the papacy. Even in the early twelfth century there was controversy in other parts of Europe over the attempts by the heads of canons' houses to be invested with the staff and be named abbot.\textsuperscript{30} In England however the small number of houses attaining abbatial rank in the twelfth century did not pose any great threat to the dignity of bishops. It was not until the very end of the fourteenth century that grounds for such a controversy arose. The elevation of Norton can be seen as something of a watershed in this matter, for not only was it a case of achieving abbey status, but also it involved the granting of the right for the abbot to wear the mitre, staff and other pontifical insignia. In the eyes of the contemporary world, the insignia would have conferred considerable prestige on the wearer and his abbey.

Grants of the right to the insignia, or some of them, were made occasionally before the late fourteenth century, but Norton's elevation to the rank of mitred abbey ushered in a period where although elevations were rare, the granting of insignia became more common. This was by no means restricted to the Augustinian order, for Cistercian and Benedictine abbots sought the mitre as well.

Among Augustinian houses, the first to follow Norton's example was St Osyth's which had as we have seen achieved abbey status in the mid-twelfth century. In May 1397 Pope Boniface IX gave permission to the abbot to use the mitre, ring and other pontifical insignia, and to give solemn benediction provided no bishop was present.\textsuperscript{31} St Osyth's is an example of the disfavour with which
such a grant was viewed by the episcopate. In February 1403 the privileges were annulled after petition by the bishop who stated that they were greatly prejudicial to his jurisdiction. However, after a delay of nine years, the permission was restored in May 1412.

In April 1398 the great abbey of Bristol, which had been founded as a Victorine house but had long since become a conventional member of the Augustinian order, obtained the mitre and the set of other rights, including that of giving benediction. The size and status of Bristol certainly provided a good basis for the honour.

It was not necessary for a priory to become an abbey for its head to be granted the mitre. In July 1398, the prior of the important Augustinian house of Southwark was given the full set of pontifical privileges. In October 1409 the priors of two more important houses were granted the same. Bridlington priory was one of a group of pioneer houses in the north, and had achieved considerable prestige. The other honour received from Boniface IX was the canonisation of John of Bridlington who had been a canon of the house. St Frideswide's priory in Oxford was another large and prominent member of the order, and was a frequent meeting place for the chapter.

Another abbey which sought and achieved mitred status was Cirencester in 1416. This year is missing from the Calendar of Papal Registers so the circumstances are unclear; however, as the richest house of the order there was ample justification for Cirencester's petition.

The increase in the number of mitred heads of Augustinian and other monastic houses caused considerable disquiet in episcopal circles. A letter from Eugenius IV to Henry, archbishop of Canterbury, in June 1439, expresses the disquiet and the reasons for it:

The pope has learned from his letters that in a synod recently celebrated by him in London, the clergy of his province of Canterbury complained that a number of abbots and priors of England, overstepping the bounds which their want of dignity and wealth prescribes, wear the mitre and pastoral staff and publicly bless the people like bishops, without other cause than, perhaps, to be deemed by onlookers the equals of bishops; wherefore the archbishop has, on behalf of the said clergy, petitioned the pope not to grant similar graces in future, and to revoke any that he may already have granted. The pope, therefore, who intends not to diminish, but to increase the pastoral dignity, signifies to the archbishop that he has always abstained from such grants and intends to do so in future, for it seems to him unworthy that they who cannot use the office and function of a bishop, should use his insignia, the which in their case savour of ostentation rather than produce the good of souls.
Pope Eugenius was as good as his word, and no mitres were granted during his pontificate. His successors however were responsible for further elevations. Kenilworth Augustinian priory, during the rule of prior Thomas Holygreve (1439–58) was raised to the rank of an abbey. A closer indication of the date is provided by an unfinished (and therefore unsigned and undated, but of the year March 1447–March 1448) letter of Nicholas V which refers to a petition for the prior to use the ring and almuce; in 1449 there is a reference to the ‘Abbot of Kenilworth’. This then is the first elevation of an Augustinian priory to abbey rank to follow that of Norton, though from the petition quoted in the letter, it appears that the mitre was not sought. Kenilworth was in many ways similar to Norton, enjoying substantial benefaction and patronage that was reflected in the buildings of the church, which had large aisle-chapels constructed on either side of the chancel, probably to accommodate burials as at Norton.

Considerable insight into the criteria behind elevation is provided by another example from the pontificate of Nicholas V. In none of the other cases is there reference to the contents of the petition for elevation submitted on behalf of the candidate, though in the case of Norton it is fortunate that the grant mentions the support given to the petition by John of Lancaster. In the grant made in 1451–2 of abbey status, the pontifical insignia, and the right of benediction to Holy Trinity, Christchurch in London, fortuitously the petition was described. It was supported by Henry, king of England, Thomas, bishop of London, and the mayor and aldermen of the city. The priory was described as the ‘first of the places of its order founded in England’ (a claim disputed by other Augustinian houses in fact, although it may have been the third of the order in England); that its fruits were abundant, exceeding 1,000 marks yearly; it was ‘subject to no other regular place but immediately to its diocesan’ and the prior was one of the governors of the city. This supports the criteria that have been suggested above for Norton’s elevation, i.e. the backing of an influential patron, size and wealth, and the social and political position of the prior. Rather surprisingly, the elevation of London Christchurch seems to have been overlooked by other writers and is not included amongst the lists of mitred abbeys elsewhere.

Two other Augustinian houses came to enjoy enhanced status. Osney Abbey, where the abbot had been privileged to use the ring, and pastoral staff, was given rights to the mitre and benediction in July 1481 by Sixtus IV. Bruton Priory, Somerset, was the last priory to be elevated. In 1511, the prior received royal
To summarise, Augustinian houses that enjoyed full abbey status, including the twelve that originated as Arrouasian or Victorine members, but excluding short-lived cases, were Bardsey, Bourne, Bristol, Bruton, Cirencester, Darley, Dorchester, Harlond, Haughmond, Kenilworth, Keynesham, Leicester, Lesnes, Lilleshall, London Christchurch, Missenden, Northampton St James, North Creake, Norton, Notley, Osney, Owston, Rocester, St Osyth, Thornton, Waltham, Wellow and Wigmore, a total of 28. Of these, Bristol, Cirencester, London Christchurch, Norton, Osney, St Osyth and Waltham became mitred (Wigmore has also been suggested, on grounds that I cannot discover). In addition, at least four priories were mitred, Bridlington, St Botolph’s Colchester, St Frideswide’s Oxford and St Mary’s Southwark. Waltham and St Botolph’s gained exemption from episcopal control. This list is more complete than those previously published, but further research will undoubtedly extend and modify it further.

With abbey status achieved, it was only a few years before Norton was seeking a further privilege from Boniface IX. In 1399 an indult was issued to the abbot and convent of Norton to cause, on the resignation or death of the present perpetual vicars, their churches at Great Budworth, Runcorn, Castle Donnington, Burton upon Stather and Pyrton to be served by their canons, being priests, appointed and removed at their pleasure. All these five churches were given to Norton as part of the foundation endowment. Two Nottinghamshire churches, Ratcliffe on Soar and Kneesall which formed part of the original endowment had been disposed of by this date, as had the church of St Michael in Chester, which was granted to Norton in about 1200. The other church over which Norton had rights was Grappenhall in Cheshire. However, although Norton is listed as patron at this date, the abbey did not own the rectory. The 1399 privilege was concerned only with fully appropriated churches.

The practice of appointing canons and monks to the livings of appropriated churches was generally condemned by the English state. Only four years later, an act of Henry IV specified that ‘the vicar of every church should be a secular person, and not a member of a religious house; that he should be vicar perpetual, and not removable at the caprice of the monastery’. This followed a rash of similar grants to abbeys and priories during the pontificate of Boniface IX, who himself eventually stopped making grants and cancelled those that had not been used. It is certain that in spite of this official disapproval of the practice, Norton exercised the right it had acquired to appoint canons to its
PLATE I BULLA OF POPE BONIFACE IX, OBVERSE.
Found in Runcorn All Saints’ churchyard, 1910
(photograph: Brian Williams)
PLATE 2 BULLA OF POPE BONIFACE IX, REVERSE
vicarages. The practice mystified Beamont, who was unaware of Boniface’s dispensation. It also caused some doubt in the fifteenth century. In 1455 a special episcopal commission was assembled to investigate the right which Norton claimed to appoint canons to livings. The incumbents of Davenham, Rostherne, Runcorn and Frodsham, together with six chaplains, were summoned to Great Budworth church to enquire into the vacancy and rights of patronage of the church. They found that the abbot and convent of Norton were the true patrons and that they possessed the right, by virtue of a papal dispensation, to present one of their brethren whenever the vicarage should fall vacant.

It seems likely that the churches mentioned in Boniface’s grant possessed copies of the document, which could be produced on occasions such as the visit of the special commission to Great Budworth. This would explain the discovery of a papal bulla (a lead seal once attached to a papal document) in the churchyard of All Saints Parish Church, Runcorn. It was found in 1910, according to a label on the box in which it is kept in the church. It had suffered considerable corrosion when examined by the writer in 1976, but following conservation was identifiable as a bulla of Pope Boniface IX (1389–1404) (Plates 1 & 2). It is of the standard type with the pope’s name in raised letters on one side, and two faces in relief on the other side representing St Paul and St Peter. A hole runs through the seal, where it was attached by cord to a document.

In the case of the nearest churches, Runcorn and Great Budworth, the right to appoint canons to the vicarages was used at every vacancy until the Dissolution. William Hardware was presented to the living of Great Budworth in 1525 and Thomas Fletcher was vicar of Runcorn in 1536. Both men, canons of Norton, were denounced for their sins committed while acting as vicars of the two churches. Cromwell’s visitors reported that the two canons served as vicars ‘under a general capacity from the Bishop of Rome’.

The right of appointment was also exercised in the more distant churches. At Pyrton, Oxfordshire, a canon of Norton was presented as vicar in 1417, and a later vicar was Henry Terfoot (1436–47), also a canon.

The Augustinian order is often stated to have had a distinct parochial role. It has been shown that this view is certainly exaggerated in the case of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries during which there is little evidence of large-scale service of dependent churches by canons. The motive for Norton’s desire for this privilege clearly had less to do with the care of souls than with concern for the abbey’s finances. At Pyrton for example, the
value of the vicar's various entitlements in 1291 was £5 6s. 6d., a sum well worth appropriating. By the Dissolution these entitlements had risen to the considerable sum of £17 gs. 4½d., which compares with the £22 value of the Pyrton rectory; together they made a sizeable contribution to the abbey's budget. 87

At Burton on Stather in Lincolnshire, the value of the vicarage was substantial: £10 in 1291, when the rectory was worth £26 13s. 4d. 88 There is no direct evidence that the privilege was actually used, though the name of one vicar, Thomas de Wyke who was instituted in 1415 is possibly a Cheshire man, while John Penketh who was vicar in the late fifteenth century is certainly from the locality of Norton, though whether a canon is unknown.

It seems probable that the exploitation by Norton of this additional source of revenue is a result of the ambitions of the abbey in its new status. In the case of the other abbeys that were given mitred status by Boniface IX, similar grants followed the elevation.

In the period after the achievement of abbey status, the abbots of Norton appear to have been called upon more frequently than previously to serve in various capacities on episcopal commissions, papal commissions, and as members of commissions established by the Duchy of Lancaster. The elevation also had an effect on the buildings at Norton. The Buck brothers' engraving of the west front of Norton, published in 1727, shows a number of medieval buildings that had been converted into the post-Dissolution mansion. 89 The core of the building was the late twelfth century west range of the priory; the undercroft of the range survives virtually intact. The upper floor of the range almost certainly formed the prior's accommodation; the disposition of walls in the undercroft suggests the presence above of a hall, chamber and chapel. Projecting west from the range in the Buck engraving is an embattled tower, which rises above the height of the west range, and apparently consists of three storeys. Its western face has two long projecting oriel windows, and there is a large door at ground level. Most of the foundations of the tower, and two smaller towers that flanked it, were removed in the nineteenth century. However, conservation of the buildings in 1974 revealed the north east corbel and springing of the vault ribs of what was probably a four-bay ground floor room. In 1977 excavation revealed the foundations of the smaller northern flanking tower, which may have contained a staircase giving access to the two upper storeys of the main tower. The general appearance of the building in the engraving, the style of the corbel (carved to represent an angel with outstretched wings) and the
evidence from excavation all suggest a fifteenth century date for
the construction of the building. It seems likely that it was a tower
house, built to provide extra accommodation for the abbot.

This expansion is in line with developments elsewhere. The
expectations of the heads of religious houses had reached a high
level by the fifteenth century. At Haughmond, the abbot was
provided with a magnificent range of buildings. These comprised
a large fourteenth century hall, to which in the late fifteenth or
early sixteenth century chambers of more than one storey with an
elaborate bay window were added.\textsuperscript{60} Also at Haughmond, the
prior obtained an extensive suite of rooms on the lower floor of
the east (dormitory range) and a garden in the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{61}
At Cluniac Castle Acre priory in the second half of the fourteenth
century, the prior occupied the whole of the west range, with
added buildings on the west, for his own and his guests’ use; they
formed ‘a fairly substantial secular mansion’.\textsuperscript{62} In the fifteenth
century at Cistercian Valle Crucis, Clwyd, much of the monks’
(dormitory was converted into a hall for the abbot, with a chamber
alongside it.\textsuperscript{65} It was the south range that became the abbot’s
house at Benedictine Muchelney Abbey in Somerset. The rebuilding
took place in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and
provided an impressive suite of accommodation.

It can be seen from these examples that the expansion of
accommodation for the abbot of Norton was part of a general
trend that affected many middle-range abbeys and priories in the
fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, irrespective of the order to
which they owed allegiance. It is a measure of the degree of com­
fort and the extent of the facilities enjoyed by the monastic
occupants of these buildings that in all the above cases, they were
utilised with little modification as post-Dissolution secular man­
sions.

It is ironic that after all the efforts by Norton in the late four­
ten century to become an abbey, the name that is used today
is Norton Priory. Following the Dissolution, the name most
commonly employed was Norton Hall, although the seventeenth
century sketch plan by Randle Holme was labelled ‘Norton
Abby’.\textsuperscript{64} The first instance of the reversion to the former name
seems to be the inscription on the Bucks’ 1727 engraving, which
incorporates a selection of largely inaccurate historical infor­
mation. However, Norton Hall continued as the usual name until
the end of the eighteenth century, when a deliberate change to
Norton Priory must have been decided on; the latter name for the
Georgian House was certainly in use in 1810. This piece of anti­
quarianism on the part of the Brookes was the first step in a pro­
cess of recognition of the site’s medieval past that culminated in
1868 in the conversion of the late twelfth century west range undercroft from a cellar into the main entrance hall of the Georgian mansion. The name Norton Priory was thus firmly re-established, and as a result the unusual distinction conferred by Pope Boniface IX cannot now supplant it—even in the interests of historical exactitude.

NOTE

Several people engaged in research into aspects of medieval Cheshire have come across references to Norton and have drawn them to my attention. In the absence of Norton’s own documentation, the value of even isolated fragments of information is the greater, and I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Adrian Allen, Paul Booth, Paul Hosker and Anne Kettle. I would also like to thank John Cherry (British Museum) for confirming the identification of the bulla of Boniface IX.

NOTES

1 Interim accounts of the excavation have been published in *Current Archaeology*, 31 (1972), pp. 216-20 and 43 (1974), pp. 246-50, and also in the annual summaries of excavations in both *Medieval Archaeology* and *Post-Medieval Archaeology*.


13 The source of these dates is Knowles and Hadcock, *op. cit.* p. 168.


23 M. J. Bennett, op. cit.

24 P.R.O. Duchy of Lancaster Miscellaneous Books, pp. 15, 140.


27 H. E. Salter, op. cit. p. 77.

28 G. Ormerod, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 685.


32 Ibid. V, p. 535.

33 Ibid. VI, p. 250.


36 Ibid. VI, p. 161.


41 Ibid. X, p. 203.

42 V. C. H. Warwicks.


44 Ibid. XIII, p. 720.


48 G. Ormerod, op. cit. vol. 1, pp. 342, 695.

49 Ibid. 1, p. 600.


51 Lichfield Diocesan Registry, B/A/1/11, Reg. Boulers, f. 39v.

52 G. Ormerod, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 611.

53 P.R.O. State Papers, Domestic SP/1/91.


58 F. A. Jarvis, The parish of Burton upon Stather with Flixborough (1922), p. 31.


61 Ibid.
64 B.L. Harleian MS No. 2073.